

Appleby Archaeology Group October 2006

Appleby Archaeology Group enjoyed meeting and hearing from Aaron Watson, consultant archaeologist to the Living among the Monuments project hosted by Penrith Museum.

Dr Watson outlined the project which aims to explore the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in the Vale of Eden. These ages, 4000 to 1800 BC, are characterised by monuments such as Long Meg and Mayburgh Henge but little research into the period has been done in Cumbria. It is now thought that Cumbria was part of an area known as the Irish Sea Zone and it is believed that the locations in this zone, which included the east of Ireland, south west Scotland, the Isle of Man and north west Wales were interconnected by sea travel..

By using field archaeology the project aims to study, the monuments in the landscape and to identify the pattern of prehistoric settlements.

The characteristics of the different time spans were identified. In the early Neolithic, 4000-3000BC, man was clearing the land, the coastal strip was occupied, enclosures and long cairns were built and the extraction of tuff, a volcanic rock, from Great Langdale had begun. A map demonstrated the relationship of the enclosures to the Vale of Eden and showed that three enclosures defined a possible route from the north.

Between 3000-2000BC further land was cleared, the coast continued to be occupied but the monuments changed. The long cairns fell into disuse and henges and stone circles were built.. Rock art, similar to that seen in Ireland, appeared on this side of the Irish sea and recent work has demonstrated a concentration in the Vale of Eden. The extraction of tuff was now extensive and the sites in Great Langdale formed the largest Neolithic stone quarries in Western Europe. The stone was transported to other sites to be ground and polished and distributed to other parts of the country. It is possible the unfinished stone and the axes were moved through the Vale of Eden.

By the early Bronze Age, 2000-1800BC, increasing areas of marginal land were occupied and again the monuments change. The stone circles became smaller with some concentric formations. The old circles appear to have been reused for funerary rites and round barrows and kerb cairns appear. There was a decline in quarrying as metal began to replace stone .

Dr Watson then spoke of the challenge of interpreting the prehistory of the Vale of Eden. There is very

sparse archaeological evidence associated with stone circles and archaeologists tend to know more about what they were not rather than what they represent. The question to be answered is “What are these abstract forms in the landscape?” Studies have shown relationships with astronomical events such as the winter solstice at Long Meg and others have classified the geometric form. Dr Watson has re-examined the monuments in Cumbria and classified them by size. He has found that in the larger circles the stones are placed more closely together and that the small diameter circles with their more widely spaced stones often have a funeral cairn within the stones.

He spoke of the value of examining monuments in relation to the surrounding landscape and mentioned two Neolithic monuments the Ring of Brodgar on Orkney and Avebury in Wiltshire. The Ring of Brodgar is circled first by a ditch, then by sea and finally by hills so the ring might have been intended to mirror its topography. At Avebury the stone circle lies in a basin surrounded by an earthwork henge which again is surrounded by higher ground. These observations suggest that the sites were carefully selected. Similar relationships with the landscape can be seen in the large monuments in the Vale of Eden. At Long Meg there is an uninterrupted view of the Lakeland mountains and the Pennines hills but no view down into the valley. Similarly the valleys disappear at Swinside and Castlerigg and again the circles are emphasised by or emphasise the fells which surround them. Mayburgh Henge is enclosed by earthworks and then by the surrounding fells. It was suggested that these monuments were perhaps an attempt to ground Neolithic man within the mysteries of the landscape.

The smaller monuments of the early Bronze Age are found on different sites and seem to be on the edge of an area, often on a slope. They may have indicated ownership of a settlement area or marked the site of a cairn.

The second part of the project aims to discover where the people lived and it is hoped that finding the pattern of occupation may lead to a better understanding of the monuments and of the prehistory of the Vale of Eden.

A similar project, the Clava Field Walking Survey had been carried out over a number of years. The location, near Inverness, like Eden, has several Neolithic monuments and there was little knowledge of settlement areas. Those taking part walked the length of the fields at set distances apart looking for pieces of flint and other prehistoric artefacts scattered on the ground. The nature and distribution of the finds was recorded and provided clues to the human activity. At Clava the results indicated that people had lived near the monuments. A similar survey was started in early October, covering a wide strip of land from the Lake District through to the Eden Valley encompassing Mayburgh and Long Meg. Currently volunteers

are surveying fields at Whinfell and to date have found scatters of worked stone.

Dr Watson answered questions from the group and was thanked for an very informative talk. He was asked if he would come back next year to tell the group how the project was progressing.

The next meeting will be on the *Tuesday 14th November at 7.30pm*, in the Supper Room Market Hall Appleby, when Kate Sharpe of Durham University will talk about *Cumbrian Prehistoric Rock Art*.

Phyllis Rouston October 24, 2006